

Leader Rural Development Program in Spain: Profile and Functions of Workers in Local Action Groups

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Abstract

Occupations in the labor market are linked with to a minimum basic training and other capacities. Hired workers should be able to accomplish required functions related to their specific job. Regarding the rural development labor market, local action groups' workers have defined performance areas—projects, strategy, organization and training & market—but specific functions within each of these areas are not as clearly defined. Neither both, basic training and capacities needed to perform each job profile within the local action group are defined. This communication analyses training and other capacities linked to each of the job profiles within the local action group. Functions within each of the performance areas previously defined are also analyzed regarding the job profiles.

Keywords: Leader; Rural Development; Local Action Groups; Profile and Functions

Introduction

The Leader model was created in 1991 as a rural development methodology based on the prominence, autonomy and responsibility of the rural population, with regards to their own development. Therefore, it is the rural population themselves who establish local action groups, analyse their area's situation, identify and score the problems being faced; prioritising these and identifying solutions that are possible with the available resources or by requesting further resource from the public sector. An implementation strategy is developed, a strategic programme is carried out and finally, these are evaluated and new challenges are taken on (Red Rural Nacional, 2011).

Throughout its existence, the Leader model has been seen as the last major evolution stage of rural development in the European Union, marking the beginning of a new rural development policy with a territorial focus, the creation of local government structures and decentralised management. The initiative has demonstrated the pertinence of local partnerships through Local Action Groups (Cazorla Montero, de los Ríos Carmenado, & Díaz Puente, 2005).

According to the last report from the National Rural Network (2011), the Leader model has been implemented across Spain through 18 Rural Development Programmes (17 regional and 1 national), and is managed by 264 Local Action Groups. The Leader concept operates in 7,047 Spanish local towns, covering a total area of 448.207 km² (88.8% of the total national area), affecting a population of 12.4 million people (26.8% of the national total).

The rural development in Spain that is based on this initiative centres on two key elements: development strategies (conceived and implemented at a local level); and the creation of Local Action Groups, who are responsible for this strategy and for driving change and development processes in these local areas (Red Rural Nacional, 2011).

The Local Action Groups channel the financing and encourage collaboration, as well as being the practical format for two of the three key development factors; institutional context and local actors (the third one being the territory itself). The Local Action Groups are responsible for managing the finances, but more importantly for designing and implementing a development strategy, whilst managing the rural development processes in their area.

Therefore, the Local Action Groups must be able to define, with a certain amount of accuracy, the needs as well as the strengths and opportunities of the territory. These are basic factors when it comes to defining objectives and actions to be implemented; that is, when designing and executing a development strategy that responds to these needs and maximises any opportunities that arise from internal resources (physical, human and institutional), as well as from the external environment (Red Rural Nacional, 2011).

The Local Action Groups are run through an established procedure, a support structure and a management framework which governs its internal activities, its relationship with private beneficiaries and regional government organisations that supervise the programme (Diputación de Badajoz, 2012).

The Member States of the European Union have a policy of developing systems that recognise the acquired skills (both on a formal and informal basis), eliminating barriers to the mobility of workforces, and encouraging transferable skills to be learnt in order to support creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial spirit (Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea, 2010).

Within this framework, rural development is a professional environment that suffers from a lack of recognition and accreditation of the professional skills acquired through the training processes (formal and informal), yet at the same time has a track record of over 30 years with continuous change processes (García et. al., 2005) from 1990 when the Leader community initiative was created, under which a new way of tackling rural development in Spain was adopted. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the current situation facing the professionals in this sector, starting with the areas in which each operates, in order to evaluate the necessary skills required to carry out their roles.

1. Objective and methodology

This study aims to identify those areas in which there are professionals with experience in rural/local development in Spain and the training that they have received. In order to do this, surveys and interviews were carried out with key people involved in rural/local development in Spain.

Professionals involved in rural/local development in Spain are considered suitable to take part in the research. According to the National Rural Network report (2011), the Leader model has been implemented across Spain through 18 Rural Development Programmes (17 regional and 1 national), and is managed by 264 Local Action Groups located across all of Spain's Autonomous Communities. Within these Local Action Groups, there is a technical team responsible for consulting and implementing rural/local development programmes (Diputación de Badajoz, 2012). In order to ensure a representative sample, the research assumes that there are at least 3 professionals within each Local Action Group (manager, trainer and agents). This provides a minimum population of 792 professionals. The sample size is then calculated in the following way:

The research sample was calculated using a statistical formula for finite populations, using a margin of error of 10%.

Calculation of the sample:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 PQ N}{(N-1)E^2 + Z^2 PQ} \quad (1)$$

here:

n= Sample size

Z= Value Z normal curve (1.65)

P= Probability of Success (0.50)

Q= Probability of Failure (0.50)

N= Population (1320)

E= Margin of error (0.10)

By substituting in the formula:

$$n = 62.74 \approx 63$$

The surveys were carried out online. Due to the low response rate of this method, the form was sent to the 264 Local Action Groups, and a total of 91 responses were received from across the country.

1.1. Survey and interview structure

The information obtained is structured in four large blocks, as follows:

- a) When they became involved in the rural development field.
- b) Professional experience and activities carried out
- c) Complementary training since joining the Local Action Group
- d) Previous training before working the field of rural development.

1.2. Activities carried out by the local action group professionals

According to Lukesch (2007), the main functions of the Local Action Groups can be grouped into four main areas:

1. Projects & Activities area (rural/local development projects and activities): The majority of Local Action Groups believe that their main role should be to provide support and services to the project sponsors. The Local Action Groups employ professional people in order to thoroughly implement programmes, as well as seeking additional finance (local and external) to carry out local projects.

2. Strategic Area (rural/local development strategy): In its efforts to create links, synergies and a common thread between sector, thematic and multisector projects, the Local Action Group creates strategic perspectives with the aim of harmonising and combining the individual efforts of the local actors. The Local Action Groups facilitate participative processes in order to create a coherent and common vision of their region. Priority actions are then derived from these processes.

3. Organisation area (coordination of tasks, organisational development of local action groups and administrative tasks linked to the support programmes): Efficient governance is required in order to meet the demands of local development, as well as good organisation and management within the association itself (Local Action Group). Legal requirements must be met, as well as having a democratic and transparent structure. The necessary links to local and regional government departments is also critical.

4. Symbolic Area (awareness, advertising and marketing): In this intervention area, the Local Action Groups organise promotional and teambuilding events, where the main parties involved share experiences, successful projects are publicly recognised, personal achievements are rewarded and highlighted as examples of success. The territory becomes an object of symbolic communication, whilst encouraging other local actors to articulate their needs and ambitions with regards to collaborating and innovating.

2. Analysis and discussion of results

2.1. General survey information

The survey generated 91 responses, covering 29 different provinces within Spain. Of those surveyed, 51% are female and 49% are male. The survey identified the profiles shown in table 1.

Table 1. General respondent information

Job	Total number of people who work, or have worked, in this role	Average experience in the role (years)
Local Action Group Manager	25	7
Trainer	55	7
Local Development & Employment Agent	13	5

Source: Original, based on the 2013 survey.

2.2. Academic history, career path and activities carried out

The study aimed to identify the different professions involved in rural development, specifically in local action groups; as well as understanding the professional's background, the activities and role that they carry out. The figures that are shown for each professional activity demonstrate the proportion of responses from professionals involved in rural/local development. Therefore, the greater the percentage in a particular area, the greater the number of activities and functions that are carried out. In contrast, a low percentage means that the activities and functions are more general with a lower level of specialisation.

Local Action Group Manager: The manager's functions have a strong focus on projects and strategy: The actual control over the execution of the projects, carrying out rural development projects, creating and supporting projects with inter-regional collaboration; and the development, tracking and evaluation of the regional development strategy.

Within the organisation, marketing and training functions, there are functions involving the organisation and management of local action group activities, organising the activities carried out by the assembly, board of Directors and personnel from the development agency, providing information on projects and programmes, supporting initiatives to increase awareness in order to improve participation in rural development projects, and participate in writing publications, informative reports, etc.

These people have an average age of 29 when they enter the world of rural development and have carried out other roles within the Local Action Group prior to becoming the manager. Their previous training is very diverse and only 34% have received previous training relating to rural development. Once they join the Local Action Group, they have all participated in training courses on rural development.

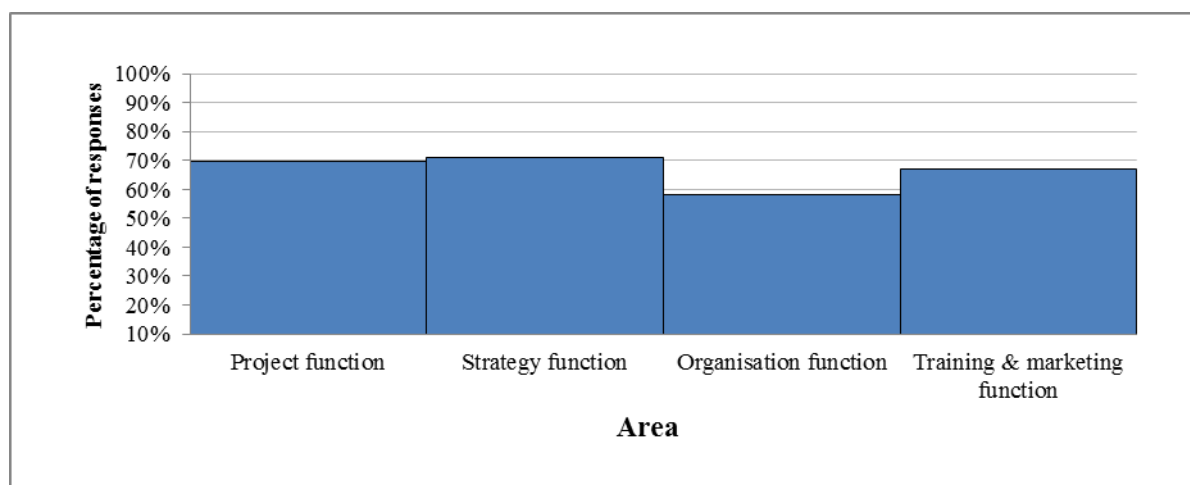


Figure 1. Priority Areas for the Local Action Group Manager

Source: Original, based on data from the 2013 survey.

Local Action Group Trainer: Their functions have a focus on projects, marketing and training, including the following factors: carrying out rural development projects, consulting on projects, providing services to project sponsors, organising marketing and team-building events where interested parties can share experiences, exchange information on projects and programmes, participate in writing publications, reports, etc., raise awareness in order to ensure better participation in rural development projects.

Within the strategy and organisation functions, there are functions involving the development, support and evaluation of regional development strategies, some administrative tasks relating to support projects, as well as organising and managing the Local Action Group's activities.

The role of trainer is their first job in the rural development field, with an average age of 29 when they start. In 74% of cases, their previous training is technical, engineering related to the rural world; it is important to mention that this technical training is more important amongst younger people. In 36% of cases, these trainers have carried out additional study related to rural development, whilst 76% have participated in courses on rural development during their time in the Local Action Group.

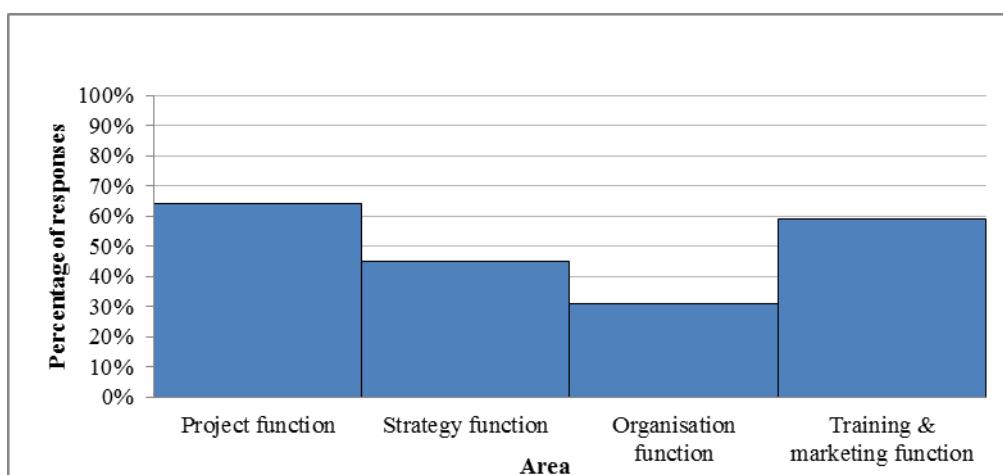


Figure 2. **Priority Areas for the Trainers**

Source: Original, based on data from the 2013 survey.

Local Development & Employment Agent: The local development and employment agent's functions are focused on marketing, training and projects that include the following: raising awareness of projects and programmes in order to improve the level of participation in rural development projects, carrying out rural development projects and providing services to project sponsors.

Within their strategy and organisation function, there are functions involving the selection of projects that are innovative, creation and expansion of local networks, development, tracking and evaluation of regional strategy, various administrative tasks associated with the support programmes.

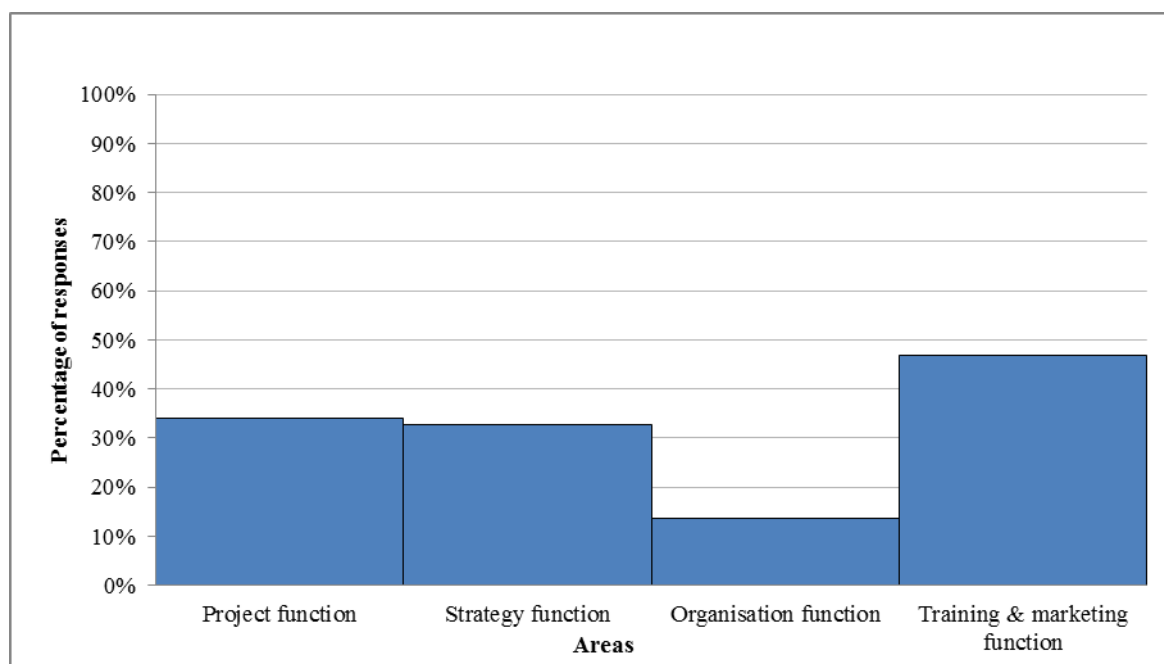


Figure 3. **Priority Areas for a local development & employment agent**

Source: Original, based on data from the 2013 survey

Conclusions

In accordance with the profiles described in the analysis and results discussion section, and with the information obtained in the surveys, the main activities and functions carried out by rural/local development are split into four main areas: projects, strategy, organisation, marketing & training.

It is evident that the proportion of responses for each area is greater amongst managers than trainers, whilst it is also greater amongst trainers than amongst agents. This indicates that the role of manager requires greater specialisation than the role of trainer. Similarly, the role of trainer requires more specialisation than the role of the agent.

The Local Action Group Manager's strengths lie within projects and strategy. However, it is important to highlight that the managers demonstrate the greatest balance across the four key areas.

The manager's previous training is very varied and their experience with rural development is extensive. This is because the training originally required for entry into a Local Action Group was not tailored to a specific audience. However, there is now demand for more specific training amongst the younger trainers and employment agents:

engineering related to the rural world, as well as courses relating to rural development for trainers, and rural development courses for employment agents.

In addition to any previous training, it is important to continue training whilst in the local action group. The vast majority of managers and trainers have completed their training through rural development courses. This suggests that training continues to play a relevant role when it comes to securing a professional career in rural development.

The main difference between the trainers and the agents is that the trainers are more dedicated to projects, whilst agents are more dedicated to marketing and training. This can be explained by the previous training that both have received. (agents – engineering, trainers – social).

The interviews carried out amongst key participants highlight that the role of the professionals involved in rural/local development has constantly changed, adapting to new rural development policies adopted by Spain since the 1990s. The agents who advocate development in rural areas have come a long way from simply carrying out projects to being dynamic agents who seek innovation opportunities in the region, whilst also seeking and incentivising the participation of actors in the area in which they operate.

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